DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 211 895 CG 015 688

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TITLE Moral Behavior as Rule Governed Behavior: Person and System Effects on Moral Decision Making.
PUB DATE Mar 81
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southeastern Psychological Association (27th, Atlanta, GA, March 25-28, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Behavioral Science Research; *Decision Making; Individual Differences; *Influences; *Interaction; *Moral Development; Moral Values; Problem Solving; Simulation; *Situational Tests; *Systems Approach

ABSTRACT

Recent approaches to research on moral development have considered the preeminence of situational factors in moral development and moral behavior. An open systems approach emphasizes the interactive effects of person and situation variables on moral decision-making. The interactive effects of three sets of variables on moral decision-making were explored with undergraduates (N=64) who made moral choices for each of six simulated situations which varied in type and attribute of situation. Subjects also completed a measure of moral value preference designed to assess individual differences in preferences for justice, utility, or pragmatism as moral values. Results showed that, across all six situations, the total amount of variance explained by both personal situation variables was consistently quite high; the total amount of variance shared by person and situation variables was quite low. Although situation attributes consistently accounted for a higher proportion of variance than person-related factors, in all six situations, person-related factors contributed a significant proportion of unique variance. The findings support a systems approach to moral judgment that views moral decision-making as a multidimensional process affected by a complex interaction between person and situation factors. (Author/NRB)

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ED211895

Moral Behavior as Rule Governed Behavior: Person and System Effects on Moral Decision Making

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Paper presented at the Southeastern Psychological Association Annual Convention, March 1981, Atlanta, Georgia.

CG 015683

Moral Behavior as Rule Governed Behavior: Person and System Affects on Moral Decision Making

The research literature on moral development and behavior has traditionally focused on the role of person variables as stage of moral development (e.g., Kohlberg, 1969; Piaget, 1932) or moral traits and dispositions (e.g., Burton, 1976; Hoffman, 1975) as determinants of moral reasoning or moral behavior. More recent approaches (e.g., Mischel and Mischel, 1976), however, have argued for the preeminence of situational factors in moral development and moral behavior. Despite this recent interest in situation variables, there is currently very little data in the literature on the role of such factors. Moreover, the studies that report such data tend to focus exclusively on situational factors rather than on the combined affects of person and situations. A recent study by Lynch and Cohen (1978), for example, examined the affect of three specific aspects of situations (i.e., subjective probability, subjective utility, and salience of consequences) on helping behavior and found that a differential weighted product average model for combining probability and utility best accounted for these situational factors.

In contrast to the above, the open systems approach used in this paper emphasizes the interactive affects of person and situation variables on moral decision making. This approach draws on open systems theory (cf. Allport, 1967; Katz & Kahn, 1966) and a view of human social behavior as rule governed behavior (cf. Harre & Secord, 1972; Hogan, 1974; Mischel, 1969; Peters, 1958). Within this framework, morality is seen as performing a critical social function (viz., system maintenance and integration) and it is conceptualized as the network of rules that govern relations between individuals within a system. Moral judgments are viewed as decisions concerning the relative priority of moral rules in specific situational contexts system, and moral conduct as behavior consistent (or inconsistent) with those rules. The research reported here further focuses on the interaction between individual moral decision making processes and features of moral decision situations.

The specific situation features that the research study reported in this paper focuses on are the type of decision that a situation requires and situational attributes evaluated during the decision making process. Type of Situation. The systems approach used here makes a distinction between two basic types or classes of moral judgments, depending upon the type of decision a situation requires. According to this approach situations involving a moral judgment require either a behavioral decision situation or a distributive decision. From a systems perspective, a behavioral decision involves a choice between acting or not acting where the act or activity has some expected

consequence for self or others. For example, a decision involving a choice between stealing or not stealing something (or lying or not lying or breaking a promise or not breaking a promise) requires a behavioral decision. Behavioral decisions are expressed in qualitative terms and the judgment usually takes the form of "Should (ought) I (we) do X (or ~X)," where X is a specific act or activity. A distributive decision situation, on the other hand, is one that presents the decision maker with a choice between two or more possible distributions of something or some activity within the system. For example, the decision involving the apportionment, allotment, or distribution of rights and obligations, resources, rewards, or punishment requires a distributive decision. Distributive decisions are expressed quantitively and the judgment usually takes the form of "How should (ought) I (we) distribute X," where X is a continuous quantity or amount of something or activity.

Behavioral and distributive decisions also differ in the type of criteria used in the decision making process. Behavioral decisions are teleological in that the consequence of an act tend to serve as decision criteria. Distributive decisions, on the other hand, are deontological in that the relative fairness (in the sense of equality or equity) of the distribution tends to serve as the decision criterion rather than the consequence of the distribution. Attributes of Situations. From a systems perspective, situations and persons are linked by type of decision a situation requires (behavioral or distributive) and the type of criterion the person selects (teleological or deontological). This approach further suggests that the criterion used in a particular situation in turn influences the situational attributes evaluated during the decision making process. The attributes used in the research reported here are: probability and utility for behavioral decision situations, and merit and need for distributive decision situations (cf. Kurtines, 1979).

Nature of morality: A systems perspective

Since the question of morality is a basic issue for the approach to moral decision making reported here, this section will briefly outline a systems perspective on morality. As a theory of social behavior, an open systems approach emphasizes the contrived nature of social structures. Social systems, unlike biological or mechanical systems, do not have a physical structure. As a consequence, social systems do not exist independent of the cognitions, attitudes, beliefs, and expectations of the individuals that comprise the systems. In systems theory, social systems are construed as structurally enduring social system are specialized subsystems that fulfill critical systems functions (e.g., production, adaptation,

integration, maintenence, etc.). Maintenence subsystems function to maintain system structure. The basic units of maintenance subsystems are rules and roles. A rule is a guide for conduct or action. A role is a subset of rules applicable to an individual participant in the system. Roles consist of a constellation of reciprocally defined rights and obligations as well as specific rules of conduct. This network of reciprocally defined rules and roles functions to preserve the fabric of interdependent behavior necessary for the accomplishment of system goals.

From a system perspective, morality is conceptualized as the network of rules and roles that function to maintain system integration. Needless to say, meta-ethical questions having to do with the meaning and justification of moral rules and principles in an absolute sense are outside the range of this paper. For the systems approach described here we will adopt a modification of an ethical theory proposed by Frankena (1963) that recognizes the existence of a least two basic principles of morality, the principle of benevolence or utility and the principle of justice. The principle of benevolence or utility defines an act or action as good if, all things considered, it serves to maximize the total amount of good in the world (i.e., the balance of good over evil). The principle of justice holds that the just distribution of goods (and evils) is itself a good. Frankena (1963, p.35) terms this ethical position a <u>mixed deontological theory</u> since it recognizes the principle of utility as a vaid one, but insists that another principle is required as well. According to this approach, an individual's moral obligation is normally determined by the rules and conventions usually associated with morality; but in cases of confict between the rules the individual's moral obligation is determined by the rule that best fulfills the joint requirements of utility and justice. The principles of utility and justice are thus viewed as prima facie rather than absolute, and the theory allows that on some occasions justice may take precedence over utility while on other occasions utility may take precedence over justice. The theory further suggests that in some cases it will be difficult (if not impossible) to determine with certainty which principle should take precedence.

The open systems aproach described here adds the principle of pragmatism (or instrumentalism) to this basic ethical position. The principle of pragmatism defines an act or activity as good if, all things considered, it is more useful, practical, or efficient relative to alternative act or activities. Instrumentalism is conceptualized as a default principle applicable in those cases where the principles of utility and justice yield no clearly defined course of action.

An open systems perspective on morality requires a philosophic conception of moral principles as prima facie and

mixed because of the two sometimes mutually exclusive tasks or goals that the maintenance subsystem performs. Maintenance subsystems function to maintain predictability and stability within systems. In order to successfully fulfill this function, maintenance structures must: 1) regulate the interpersonal behavior of occupants of roles within the system, and 2) regulate the distribution or allocation of resources, rewards, and sanctions within the system. Since the achievement of one goal is frequently incompatible with the achievement of the other, moral conflict is built into social systems.

This paper presents data on the interactive affects of three sets of of person and situation variables -- type of situation, attribute of situations, and individual differences in moral value preferences -- on moral decision making.

Method

Subjects. The subjects for this study consisted of 64 undergraduates college student volunteers recruited from psychology and non-psychology classes at a large urban university in the South Florida area. The sample contained 25 males and 39 females with an average age of 26.3 (s.d. = 4.7).

Procedure. The dependent variable for this study was moral choice in each of six simulated situations developed for use in this research. To maximize the structural similarity of the simulations, all six situations involved the same three fictional characters. The simulated situations were arranged in a semi-structured format. The following set of person and situation variables served as independent variables. Type of Situation. Three of the situations involved a behavioral decision and required the respondent to make a decision about lying, breaking a promise, and stealing. The other three situations involved a distributive decision and required the respondent to make a decision about the distribution of responsibility, a reward, and a punishment. The order of presentation was alternated by type of judgment. Moral Value Preference. The influence of person factors on moral decision making was assessed using the Multi-method Concept Assessment Questionnaire (MCAQ) (Kurtines, 1979). The MCAQ is a measure of moral value preference designed to assess individual difference in preferences for justice, utility, or pragmatism as moral values or principles. Situation Attributes. The situational attributes used for this study were: probability and utility for the behavioral decision situations, and merit and need for the distributive judgment situations. For the three behavioral decision situations respondents were asked to make subjective ratings on a 100 point scale of the likelihood that the consequence described in the situation would occur and a

subjective rating of the severity of the consequence. Similarly, for the distributive judgment situations the respondents were asked to make a subjective rating on a 100 point scale of the relative importance of merit and the relative importance of need as equity criteria in choosing between the two distributions described in the situations. These ratings served as measures of Subjective Expected Utility (SEU = U x P) and Subjective Expected Justness (SEJ = M x N). Respondents were also asked which of the two possible courses of action they would choose if they were the main character in the situations.

Analysis. The relative influence of person and situation factors on moral decision making was analyzed using multiple regression techniques. A multiple regression was conducted for each of the six situations using moral choice as the dependent variable and two sets of person and situation variables as independent variables. Scores on the MCAQ (Justice, Utility, and Pragmatism) served as measures of value preference, and SEU (Utility, Probability) and SEJ (Merit, Need) as measures of situation specific evaluative attributes. Type of situation was not entered as a variable because the attributes evaluated varied by type of situation. All regression analyses yielded significant multiple Rs. More importantly, in each situation, both person factors (i.e., MCAQ scores) and situation factors (i.e., SEU and SEJ ratings) contributed a significant increment of explained variance. Since the purpose of the study was to examine the combined affects of person and situation factors on moral decision making, the results of the multiple regressions were further analyzed using a procedure for partitioning regression variance reported by Mood (1971). This method allows for a more symetrical analysis of the relative contribution of person and situation factors. Regression procedures are asymmetrical because of the sequential order in which the variables are entered into the regression equation. Variance associated with the variable entered first includes not only the explained variance that is unique to that variable, but also the variance that it shares with other variables (Cronkite and Moos, 1978). The procedure described by Mood (1971) makes comparisons of variance more symmetric by partitioning the unique and shared variance accounted for by each variable or combination in the regression equations.

Results

Table 1 presents the results of the regression analysis, partitioned into unique and shared variance for the person and situation variables.

Insert Table 1 about here

The most significant findings can be summarized as follows: a) the total amount of variance that could be explained by both sets of variables across all six situations was consistently quite high, b) the total amount of variance shared by both person and situation variables, on the other hand, was generally quite low across all six situations, c) situation attributes (SEU and SEJ ratings) consistently accounted for a higher proportion of variance than person related factors (Justice, Utility, and Pragmatism scores), d) the proportion of variance that could be accounted for by situation related factors in distributive decision situations was extremely high (> 90%) in all three distributive situations, e) the proportion of variance that could be accounted for by situation factors in all three behavioral decision situations was also high, but consistently lower (< 90%) than in the distributive decision situations, f) in all six situations person related factors contributed a significant proportion of unique variance.

Discussion

This paper presents data on a systems appproach to moral judgment. This approach emphasizes the interactive affects of person and situation variables on moral decision making. The interactive affects of three sets of variables were examined in this study: type of situation, attributes of situations, and individual differences in moral value preference. Overall, the results of the research provide support for a systems approach to moral judgment that views moral decision making as a multi-dimensional process affected by a complex interaction between person and situation factors.

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Table 1

Partitioning of Explained Variance for Six Situations

Variable	Situation					
	Behavioral			Distributive		
	LY	BP	ST	RW	RE	PU
Person Related						
Unique Variances						
Justice	.002	.000	.000	.029a	.001	.027a
Benevolence	.005	.000	.036b	.003	.004	.000
Pragmatism	.038b	.039b	.022a	.000	.041b	.000
Shared Variance						
Sum of all Combinations d	.015a	.000	.036b	.019a	.015a	.009
Subtotal	.060b	.039b	.094b	.051b	.061b	.036a
Proportion of R^2	.431	.122	.377	.112	.149	.072
Situation Related						
Unique Variance						
Utility (or Merit)	.043b	.109c	.007	.011a	.243c	.171c
Probability (or Need)	.003	.017a	.033b	.203c	.004	.144c
Shared Variance						
UT & PB (or ME & NE)	.021b	.015	.051b	.164c	.057b	.140c
Subtotal	.075b	.277c	.091b	.378c	.304c	.455c
Proportion of R^2	.539	.868	.365	.832	.741	.915
Situation X Person						
Shared Variance						
Sum of All Combinations e	.004	.003	.064b	.025a	.045b	.006
Proportion of R^2	.029	.009	.257	.055	.109	.012
Total R^2	.139	.319	.249	.454	.410	.497

Note: a = explained variance greater than 1%
b = explained variance greater than 3%
c = explained variance greater than 10%
d = These combinations are (JU,BE), (JU,PG), (BE,PG), (JU,BE,PG)
e = These combinations are (JU,UT) (JU,PB)) (JU,ME) (JU,NE) (BE,UT) (BE,PB) (BE,ME) (BE,NE) (PG,PB) (PG,ME) (PG,NE) (JU,BE,UT) (JU,BE,PB) (JU,BE,ME) (JU,BE,NE) (BE,PG,UT) (BE,PG,PB) (BE,PG,ME) (BE,PG,NE) (JU,PG,UT) (JU,PG,PB) (JU,PG,ME) (TU,PG,NE) (JU,BE,PG,ME) (TU,BE,PG,NE) (JU,BE,PG,ME,NE)
LY = Lying, BP = Breaking a promise, ST = Stealing, RW = Reward, RE = Responsibility, PU = Punishment